

2013

Review of Nature's Challenge to Free Will by Bernard Berofsky

William Simkulet

Cleveland State University, w.simkulet@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clphil_facpub



Part of the [Metaphysics Commons](#)

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Publisher's Statement

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Wiley in *Philosophical Investigations* in 2013, available online: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/phn.12004/abstract>.

Repository Citation

Simkulet, William, "Review of Nature's Challenge to Free Will by Bernard Berofsky" (2013). *Philosophy & Comparative Religion Department Faculty Publications*. 44.

https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clphil_facpub/44

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy & Comparative Religion Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy & Comparative Religion Department Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

Bernard Berofsky, *Nature's Challenge to Free Will*

William Simkulet, *University of Kansas*

In the free-will debate there are two kinds of compatibilists – those resigned to the impossibility of genuine free will but who articulate some cache of compatibilist freedoms or advocate some form of libertarian fictionalism, and those who believe that genuine free will is compatible with determinism and take the free-will problem to be why others do not see it this way. Bernard Berofsky is of the latter kind. The goal of the book is to defend Humean compatibilism from incompatibilist concerns.

Berofsky sees opposition to compatibilism as arising from the conflation of determinism and necessitarianism. He says “Freedom is compatible with determinism because the only reason to believe otherwise is based on the false metaphysics of *necessitarianism*” (p. 3). Hume, Berofsky says, believed we had no reason to believe that necessary connections exist in nature; rather, we are merely psychologically inclined to infer necessary connections from the regular conjunction of events. When we subtract our subjective expectation, all we are left with are pairs of events that happen to occur together.

By rejecting necessitarianism, Berofsky has apparently staked a position between the “necessitarian” determinist position that the actual past necessitates only one possible future, and the indeterminist position that the actual past is compatible with the existence of multiple possible futures. For Berofsky the actual past coexists with only one possible future, without necessitating that possible future. This is new ground in the free-will debate, but unfortunately it provides a rather shaky foundation for Berofsky’s defence of compatibilism. First, it is not clear that Berofsky’s middle ground counts as a deterministic metaphysical theory; if not blatant indeterminism, his position seems to be that the world can be wholly causally determined without being causally necessitated, where determinism just is constant conjunction. It is not clear that this view is a determinist view at all; it seems to be a description of our experiential data rather than a theory about how the world is.

Second, much as we are unjustifiably psychologically inclined to believe that there is a necessary connection between constantly conjoined events, we are psychologically inclined to believe that the past will be like the future. Berofsky contends that causal laws are to be understood as statements of regular association of events, but all we can know, by his reasoning, is that causal laws are statements of regular association of events *in the past* – we are not justified to believe that these regular associations

will persist in the future. If this is the case, Berofsky cannot help himself to the conclusion that there is only one possible future.

This trouble stems from a misreading of what Berofsky calls Hume's antinecessitarian position. Hume argues that we never have any direct experience of a necessary connection between two events, and from this Berofsky concludes that causal necessity is impossible. More troubling, for Hume the alternative to necessity is chance, which is inconsistent with a wholly deterministic worldview. To defend Humean compatibilism, Berofsky must show that free will is consistent with determinism regardless of whether our beliefs about a deterministic, necessitarian world are justified.

Berofsky believes that his rejection of necessitarianism plays a key role in his metaphysics, contending that by doing so we can understand ourselves as playing a creative role in our own actions. "Through our decision making activity, we in part determine the very laws by which our decisions are governed," he contends (p. 5).

There is little discussion of moral responsibility in this book, by design. Berofsky contends that the problem of the apparent incompatibility of moral responsibility with determinism is very different from the problem of the apparent incompatibility of free will and determinism. He claims that "the heart of the traditional problem of *free will* and determinism is ascertaining just how limiting to the agent is a deterministic world" (p. 6). The problem with this approach is that the concept of free will is best understood by the role it plays in moral responsibility – Berofsky constructs his account of free will indifferent to this role, and his account is uncontroversially inconsistent with true moral responsibility as a result.

This schism is well illustrated in Berofsky's defence of compatibilism against what he calls the incompatibilist demand for self-creation. He characterises the incompatibilist "complaint" like so "If my decision is determined, I am not its real author; and if I am not its real author, I have forgone the opportunity to take responsibility for what I become, for the values I live by. . . . If I am ultimately responsible for my nature and my values, I can take credit or blame for the results and that is what makes me fully human" (p. 46). Berofsky identifies this concern as a threat posed by determinism to one's self-worth. He responds that, in a deterministic world, agents still play a role in determining their actions (even if their doing so is itself determined), that they can still take responsibility for their decisions and that these decisions reflect the agent who makes them. Berofsky admits that the incompatibilist will be dissatisfied with this response, but it strikes me that the incompatibilist has made two substantial points that Berofsky misses. The first point turns on the apparent incompatibility of moral responsibility with determinism – if our actions are determined by circumstances outside of our control, in what sense, the incompatibilist worries, can we be held morally responsible for them?

Anyone can take responsibility for anything, but actually deserving blame or credit is quite different.

The second point turns on a notion the compatibilist already accepts – that there is a substantive difference between self-determination and being causally determined by external sources such as coercion, hypnosis and the like. The incompatibilist worry is that what the compatibilist calls free will is type-identical with the *prima facie* undesirable external deterministic processes.

Berofsky characterises the incompatibilist's notion of ultimate control as being in the position of one who has the power to choose from options that cannot be ranked, and concludes that nothing is gained by this power. This characterisation of ultimate control is a mistake.

First, this characterisation ignores the Buridan's ass paradox – a donkey equidistant from two sources of food who ranks them identically would apparently starve, if not for the ability to choose arbitrarily between these equally ranked options in the very way that Berofsky claims is worthless. Of course, this kind of control would not satisfy the incompatibilist – but clearly something is gained by possessing it.

Second, it is uncontroversially true that the ultimate control in question is the ability to be able to non-arbitrarily choose which reasons one acts upon. Much as we are psychologically inclined to infer necessity from constant conjunction, it seems that we are inclined to infer this kind of ultimate control over our actions from our experiences. Even if this notion of ultimate control is incoherent, it is uncontroversially preferable to determinism, as the undetermined agent has all of the options as the determined one and more. The only conceivable picture of ultimate control that would be less preferable to determinism is one in which actions were wholly determined at random – if all free actions are made with the same inattention to reason as the donkey's choosing to go left over right. This is how Hume characterised the concept of liberty, but it is clearly not what the incompatibilist desires or what Berofsky spurns.

Finally, this kind of control is said to be a prerequisite for true moral responsibility – for being responsible for one's actions. Berofsky's account of free will is *prima facie* inconsistent with such responsibility; rather, he sketches a view rather similar to that of Robert Kane, where one's taking responsibility for one's actions is not justified morally. Instead, as with Kane, one is said to have free will if one is causally determined to embrace one's beliefs and character traits as one's own. Berofsky's view differs from Kane, largely, in so far as Kane required at least one undetermined action to occur for the agent to self-identify with, while Berofsky is content that the agent be wholly determined.

In the final chapters of this book, Berofsky offers a rigorous treatment of what can be called a non-necessitarian determinist account of causal

laws, arguing that determined agents can play a substantive role in determining the causal laws that govern them, rather than being determined by them. This role, I think, fails to live up to what the incompatibilist believes is necessary for moral responsibility, but helps to draw a distinction between the necessitarian position he refutes and his own determinist position. This distinction, I believe, represents this book's greatest contribution to the free-will debate, but I fear this distinction is every bit as incoherent as the incompatibilist position is often made out to be.

The University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS 66045
Simkuletwm@yahoo.com